



Decoding muffled voices of feminist resistance in Shashi Deshpande's 'The dark holds no terror'

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Abstract

Indian women have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually colonized and biologically subjugated against a male dominant set up. Any attempt by a woman to rise above the oppressive forces rooted in the middle class margins has either been curbed mercilessly or ignored in the name of social dignity. However, the status of woman all over the world, and particularly in India, has been undergoing a rapid change in the recent decades. Shashi Deshpande, in her fiction deals with the empowerment of women. *The Dark Holds No Terror* focuses on the changing dynamics of man-woman relationship. The present paper attempts to articulate Deshpande's concern about the problems faced by a career-oriented woman, her struggle to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother and as a human being.

Keywords: subaltern, feminist, marginalize, patriarch, stereotype

Introduction

Today, when globalization seems to have taken over every form of art and culture everywhere in the world, there's still one form of class that thrives on being different. This marginalized class which flourishes away from the mainstream is euphemized as 'subaltern'. Eminent critic Kaur point out that in 'The Dark Holds No Terror' Shashi Deshpande examines the "double colonization" of women under imperial and patriarchal conditions and also dares to expose and challenge the age-old traditions and prejudices in a male-dominated society" (p.18).

The term 'subaltern' has been coined by the great Italian Marxist writer Antonio Gramsci for the proletariats who have no voice in the power structure. Guha points out the insidious presence of "the general attribute of subordination...whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office in any other way" (p7). Nowadays, this term is being used by the feminists in post-colonial terms to discuss the nuances of race and power dynamics with regards to women who have no voice in the patriarchal regime.

The subaltern status of women in society has often been fictionalized in Indian classical and religious texts. Indian mythology and vocabulary have given 'women' many synonyms namely 'Nari', 'Abla' etc. A girl child grows up with the tales of Sita's 'agni pariksha' (ordeal by fire), Draupadi's public disrobing and humiliation, Ahilya's (cursed by her husband) turning into stone awaiting deliverance at the touch of Rama's foot. This apartheid faced by woman in a patriarchal society is multifaceted, very subtle and insidious and hard to recognize. It is usually presented in the guise of adulation, idealization, concern or protectiveness.

Indian women have always been socially and psychologically oppressed, sexually colonized and biologically subjugated against a male dominated set-up. All endeavors by a woman to rise above the repressive forces grounded in the middle class society have either been crushed ruthlessly or overlooked in the name of decency. However, the status of woman all over the world, particularly in India has been undergoing a sea change in recent decades. This phenomenon has drawn the attention of literary artists, theorists and sociologists alike. The famous critic Sattar believes that Shashi Deshpande, in her fiction mostly focuses on the issues relating to the "rainbow coalition of rights, desires, agendas struggles, victories" for all women. Atrey and Kirpal have also pointed out that her fiction "eclectically employs the post-modern technique of deconstructing patriarchal culture and customs and reveal these to be man-made constructs" (p.15). Her female protagonists set out in a quest for empowerment by escaping the controlling authority of the male in the realm of social power.

There are a number of novels which deal with woman's problems. But the treatment is often peripheral and the novels end up glorifying the stereotypical virtues of Indian women like patience, submissiveness, devotion and an abject acceptance of what is meted out to her. However, 'The Dark Holds No Terror' is a totally different novel in the sense that it focuses on the changing dynamics of man-woman relation. It shatters the myth of man's superiority and glorification of woman as a 'paragon of virtues'. It is a realistic novel based on the problems faced by a career oriented woman, her struggle to find and preserve her identity as a wife, mother and as a human being.

In 'The Dark Holds No Terror' Saru (Sarita) is the central character. She belongs to a traditional Brahmin family. The novel offers a double perspective. It shows her life before marriage and after it by juxtaposing the past and the present continuously. Her character can be truly understood in the light of psychological precepts.

First, she carries within herself the sad effects of 'gender discrimination'. Her feminist ideals arise as a reaction against the discriminatory psychological set up of society and her family as well. Secondly, Saru also suffers from a deep-rooted feeling of being an unwanted child. Thirdly, and most tragically Saru suffers the scars of a terrible physical trauma on her psyche.

Apartheid against women is perpetrated not only by men but also by women who work against their own gender in their role as mother, mother-in-law etc. Shashi Deshpande's heroines often suffer discrimination at the hands of matriarchal figures and the only recourse for them is to seek an escape to such a place where they cannot exercise their repressive will on them. In 'The Dark Holds No Terror' the mother-daughter relationship is grounded on gender-bias and a feeling of being unloved. Since her childhood, Saru is made to feel inferior, something of no significance, a mere 'nothing' and second to Dhruva, her brother. A turning point in her life comes with the accidental death of her brother by drowning. All her life, she is haunted by the idea of her mother holding her responsible for her brother Dhruva's death by drowning, "You did it, you did this, you killed him" (p.173).

She, too on her part has a guilty conscience as she considers herself responsible for having remained a mute spectator to her brother's death. She never refutes the charge levelled against her by her mother because as Meenakshi Mukherjee states "Dhruva's demise has always been her subconscious desire and there is a very thin demarcation between her wish and its fulfillment" (p.198).

This unabashed discrimination between Saru and her brother results in a sense of insecurity and abhorrence towards her parents, especially mother who is primarily responsible for her resultant defiant behavior. Her hatred towards her mother is so strong that she becomes rebellious just to hurt her, "I hated her, I wanted to hurt her, would her make her suffer" (p.142). This hatred motivates her to leave home for Bombay and seek medicine as a career. Deprived of love throughout her life she now wants to be adored and loved. Therefore, in the college when she gets attention from Manu, a college mate she wonders, "How could I be anyone's beloved? I was the redundant, the unwanted, an appendage one could do without" (p.63). Her orthodox mother was totally against her daughter's marrying a man from a lower caste but she marries him only to offend and take revenge on her. Later in life, she reproaches her mother in her thoughts, "If you [mother] hadn't fought me so bitterly, if you hadn't been so against him, perhaps, I would never have married him" (p.96). Saru even rejects the rituals like circumambulating the 'tulsi plant' and rituals meant to increase the life span of the husband merely to indicate her authority and capacity to see her life independent of her mother.

Saru regards herself as the most blessed woman on earth because the first few years of her marriage are full of beatitude. Manu is her savior and the romantic hero who rescues Saru – a damsel in distress. Manu too shows off his wife as a prized possession. Manohar was the master of the family before Saru got recognition as a doctor. Till now, she was recognized as the wife of Mr. Manohar, but ever since the explosion in the factory, people started calling Manohar as doctor Saru's husband. Saru becomes a successful doctor while Manohar's career moves nowhere. Manohar regards Saru's success as his failure and this shatters their family life. His male ego is brutally hurt when the girl interviewing for the woman's magazine happens to ask her innocently, "How does it feel when your wife earns not only the butter but most of the bread as well?" (p.200). Manohar's male ego is badly piqued after this incident. He feels embarrassed, weak and effeminate. Unable to digest his insult Manohar turns into an animal and attacks her at night. Atrey and Kirpal point out clearly, "unable to assert his 'manliness' over her [Saru] like a traditional male, (that is in economic terms), he resorts to sexual molestation of her at night while playing the loving husband during the day" (p.43).

Even Saru has two selves. Though she has gained economic freedom yet, her state of affairs are miserable. She has to perform double duties. Besides practicing medicine she has to fulfil the assigned job of a housewife as well. She expresses her desire to leave her practice but Manu dissuades her from doing so as their standard of living wouldn't be possible on Manu's income alone. During the day, she is a competent lady doctor, but at night, she is a frightened and trapped animal. She returns to her parental home on the pretext of consoling her father who has lost his wife. But, actually this is an opportunity for her to flee from the nightly terrors.

In her father's house Manu tries to think over the reasons of her failed marriage. After analyzing her situation objectively she eventually arrives at the conclusion that the root cause of the problem lies as much within her as it lies outside. Earlier in the novel, she has her own ideology of a successful marriage. For instance, she ironically presents a perfect recipe for a successful marriage during a discourse with a group of college students, "A wife should always be few feet behind her husband. If he is an MA you should be a BA. If he is 5'4 tall you shouldn't be more than 5'3 tall. If he is earning five hundred rupees you should never earn more than four hundred and ninety nine rupees. That's the only rule to follow if you want a happy marriage" (p.137).

But now she sees her own inadequacy too. She realizes her inability to combine roles and be a source of love as a daughter, sister, wife and mother. She regrets that her brother and mother died because she didn't take care of them rather deserted them. She further feels, "My husband is a failure because I destroyed his manhood" (p.217). The metaphor of 'home' which has been used repeatedly in the novel displays her experimentation with life. It also reveals the challenges she faces as well as the apparent successes and failures she experiences which finally lead to her final reconciliation with her family.

In spite of the strong imbalance persisting between the sexes, Deshpande sees the need to harmonize the man-woman relationship as equal partners. She observes that there is no victory in dominating the male. The need is to see the indispensability of each other's need for space, freedom of expression and love. She doesn't believe in taking the anti-men and anti-marriage stance. Beena Agarwal reinforces the same idea and points out that "The

fictional world of Shashi Deshpande is not directed towards the annihilation of the existing order, but it seeks a reorientation of society where a more balanced relationship might have been possible” (217).

Deshpande’s female protagonists stand apart from the crowd because of their innate virtues. They are usually educated, proactive and progressive moving along the rough territory of life. Sandwiched between modernity and tradition, illusion and reality they progress along the axis of delimiting restrictions and chalk out a space for themselves as they grow. They start up as rebellious and dissatisfied but end up revitalized and restored. Being the representatives of the new generation of self-actualizing women, they set out to find new ways of dealing with their problems. Instead of running away from them they eventually realize that the solution lies within them. Saru, in *The Dark Holds No Terror* undergoes an odyssey in her own self and learns to free herself of guilt, shame, and humiliation. She is also introduced into the mysterious haze of human existence. The epigraph of the novel, “You are your own refuge. There is no other refuge. This refuge is hard to achieve (The Dhammapada)” gains its total significance when Saru realizes that the parental home cannot be a refuge. She realizes that neither her father nor her husband Manohar can be her refuge. She is her own refuge. She has to overcome herself; she has to kill the ghosts that haunt her; she has to find her own way of salvation and that she can attain peace of mind by her own efforts. Eventually, she comes to realize that her profession as a doctor is her own and she will decide what to do with it “My life is my own”.

Deshpande doesn’t make her characters all time rebels against patriarchal hegemony. She makes them grow with the renewed knowledge of their own selves as well as of the world around. Her female characters possess everything to make them macrocosmic. Overcoming the fears and inhibitions they realize that escape is no solution. They finally emerge as self-assured figures ready to face the greatest fears and challenges of life wholeheartedly.

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